

Biography

Wynton Marsalis is an internationally acclaimed musician, composer and bandleader, an educator and a leading advocate of American culture. He has created and performed an expansive range of music from quartets to big bands, chamber music ensembles to symphony orchestras and tap dance to ballet, expanding the vocabulary for jazz and classical music with a vital body of work that places him among the world's finest musicians and composers.

Always swinging, Marsalis blows his trumpet with a clear tone, a depth of emotion and a unique, virtuosic style derived from an encyclopedic range of trumpet techniques. When you hear Marsalis play, you're hearing *life* being played out through music.

Marsalis' core beliefs and foundation for living are based on the principals of jazz. He promotes individual creativity (improvisation), collective cooperation (swing), gratitude and good manners (sophistication), and faces adversity with persistent optimism (the blues). With his evolved humanity and through his selfless work, Marsalis has elevated the quality of human engagement for individuals, social networks and cultural institutions throughout the world.

The Early Years

Wynton was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, on October 18, 1961, to Ellis and Dolores Marsalis, the second of six sons. At an early age, he exhibited a superior aptitude for music and a desire to participate in American culture. At age eight Wynton performed traditional New Orleans music in the Fairview Baptist Church band led by legendary banjoist Danny Barker, and at 14 he performed with the New Orleans Philharmonic. During high school Wynton performed with the New Orleans Symphony Brass Quintet, New Orleans Community Concert Band, New Orleans Youth Orchestra, New Orleans Symphony, various jazz bands and with the popular local funk band, the Creators.

At age 17 Wynton became the youngest musician ever to be admitted to Tanglewood's Berkshire Music Center. Despite his youth, he was awarded the school's prestigious Harvey Shapiro Award for outstanding brass student. Wynton moved to New York City to attend Juilliard in 1979. When he started gigging around the City, the grapevine began to buzz. The excitement around Wynton attracted the attention of Columbia Records executives who signed him to his first recording contract. In 1980 Wynton seized the opportunity to join the Jazz Messengers to study under master drummer and bandleader [Art Blakey](#). It was from Blakey that Wynton acquired his concept for bandleading and for bringing intensity to each and every performance. In the years to follow Wynton performed with [Sarah Vaughan](#), Dizzy Gillespie, Sweets Edison, Clark Terry, [John Lewis](#), Sonny Rollins, Ron Carter, Herbie Hancock, Tony Williams and countless other jazz legends.

Wynton assembled his own band in 1981 and [hit the road](#), performing over 120 concerts every year for 15 consecutive years. With the power of his superior musicianship, the infectious sound of his swinging bands and a far-reaching series of performances and music workshops, Marsalis rekindled widespread interest in jazz throughout the world and inspired a renaissance that attracted a new generation of fine young talent to jazz. A look at the more distinguished jazz musicians to emerge for the decades to follow reveals the efficacy of Marsalis' workshops and includes: James Carter, Christian McBride, Roy Hargrove, Marcus Roberts, Wycliffe Gordon, Harry Connick Jr., Nicholas Payton, Eric Reed and Eric Lewis, to name a few.

Wynton also embraced the jazz lineage to bring recognition to the older generation of overlooked jazz musicians and prompted the re-issue of jazz catalogs by record companies worldwide.

Classical Career

Wynton's love of the music of Bach, Beethoven, Mozart and others drove him to pursue a career in classical music as well. He recorded the [Haydn, Hummel and Leopold Mozart trumpet concertos](#) at age 20. His debut recording received glorious reviews and won the Grammy Award® for "Best Classical Soloist with an Orchestra." Marsalis went on to record [10 additional classical records](#), all to critical acclaim. Wynton performed with leading orchestras including the New York Philharmonic, Los Angeles Philharmonic, [Boston Pops](#), The Cleveland Orchestra, Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra, [English Chamber Orchestra](#), Toronto Symphony Orchestra and London's Royal Philharmonic, working with an eminent group of conductors including: [Leppard](#), Dutoit, Maazel, Slatkin, [Salonen](#) and Tilson-Thomas. A timeless highlight of Wynton's classical career is his collaboration with soprano Kathleen Battle on their recording [Baroque Duet](#). Famed classical trumpeter Maurice André praised Wynton as "potentially the greatest trumpeter of all time."

Record Production

Wynton has produced over [80 records](#) which have sold over seven million copies worldwide including three Gold Records. His recordings consistently incorporate a heavy emphasis on the blues, an inclusive approach to all forms of jazz from New Orleans to modern jazz, persistent use of swing as the primary rhythm, an embrace of the American popular song, individual and collective improvisation, and a panoramic vision of compositional styles from dittys to dynamic call and response patterns (both within the rhythm section and between the rhythm section and horn players).

The Composer

Wynton Marsalis is a prolific and inventive composer. He is the world's first jazz artist to perform and compose across the full jazz spectrum from its New Orleans roots to bebop to modern jazz. He has also composed a violin concerto and four symphonies to introduce new rhythms to the classical music canon.

Marsalis collaborated with the Lincoln Center Chamber Music Society in 1995 to compose the string quartet [At The Octoroon Balls](#), and again in 1998 to create a response to Stravinsky's A Soldier's Tale with his composition [A Fiddler's Tale](#).

Several prominent choreographers embraced Wynton's inventiveness with commissions to compose suites to fuel their imagination for movement. This impressive list includes Garth Fagan ([Citi Movement-Griot New York](#) & Lighthouse/Lightening Rod), Peter Martins at the New York City Ballet ([Jazz: Six Syncopated Movements and Them Twos](#)), Twyla Tharp with the American Ballet Theatre ([Jump Start](#)), Judith Jamison at the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre ([Sweet Release](#) and [Here...Now](#)), and Savion Glover (Petite Suite and Spaces).

Wynton reconnected audiences with the beauty of the American popular song with his collection of standards recordings (Standard Time Volumes I-VI). He re-introduced the joy in New Orleans jazz with his recording [The Majesty Of The Blues](#). And he extended the jazz musician's interplay with the blues in Uptown Ruler, [Levee Low Moan](#), [Thick In The South](#) and other blues recordings.

Marsalis introduced a fresh conception for extended form compositions with [Citi Movement](#), his sanctified [In This House On This Morning](#) and [Blood On The Fields](#). His inventive interplay with melody, harmony and rhythm, along with his lyrical voicing and tonal coloring assert new possibilities for the jazz ensemble. In his dramatic oratorio [Blood On The Fields](#), Wynton draws upon the blues, work songs, chants, spirituals, New Orleans jazz, Ellingtonesque orchestral arrangements and Afro-Caribbean rhythms --- using Greek chorus-style recitations with great affect to move the work along. The New York Times Magazine said [Blood On The Fields](#) “marked a symbolic moment when the full heritage of the line, Ellington through Mingus, was extended into the present.” The San Francisco Examiner stated, “Marsalis’ orchestral arrangements are magnificent. Duke Ellington’s shadings and themes come and go but Marsalis’ free use of dissonance, counter rhythms and polyphonics is way ahead of Ellington’s mid-century era.” [Blood on the Fields](#) became the first jazz composition ever to be awarded the coveted Pulitzer Prize in Music in 1997.

Wynton extended his achievements in [Blood On The Fields](#) with [All Rise](#), an epic composition for big band, gospel choir, and symphony orchestra – a classic work of high art – which was performed by the New York Philharmonic under the baton of Kurt Masur along with the Morgan State University Choir and the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra (December 1999).

Marsalis collaborated with Ghanaian master drummer Yacub Addy to create [Congo Square](#), a groundbreaking composition combining harmonies from America’s jazz tradition with fundamental rituals in African percussion and vocals (2006).

For the anniversary of the Abyssinian Baptist Church’s 200th year of service, Marsalis blended Baptist church choir cadences with blues accents and big band swing rhythms to compose [Abyssinian 200: A Celebration](#), which was performed by the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra and Abyssinian’s 100 voice choir before packed houses in New York City (May 2008).

In the fall of 2009 the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra premiered Marsalis’ composition [Blues Symphony](#). Marsalis infused blues and ragtime rhythms with symphonic orchestrations to create a fresh type of enjoyment of classical repertoire. Marsalis further expanded his repertoire for symphony orchestra with [Swing Symphony](#), employing complex layers of collective improvisation. The work was premiered by the renowned Berlin Philharmonic and performed with the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra in June 2010, creating new possibilities for audiences to experience a symphony orchestra swing.

Wynton made a significant addition to his oeuvre with [Concerto in D](#), a violin concerto composed for virtuoso Nicola Benedetti. The concerto is in four movements, “Rhapsody,” “Rhondo,” “Blues,” and “Hootenanny.” With this masterful composition Marsalis celebrates the American vernacular in ultra-sophisticated ways. Its fundamental character is Americana with sweeping melodies, jazzy orchestral dissonances, blues-tinge themes, fancy fiddling and a rhythmic swagger. [Concerto in D](#) received its world premiere by the London Symphony Orchestra in November 2014 and its American premiere by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra at Ravinia in July 2015.

In December 2016 Marsalis again demonstrated his expansive musical imagination and dexterity for seasoning the classical music realm with jazz and blues influences with [The Jungle](#), performed by the New York Philharmonic along with the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra. “The Jungle,” according to Marsalis, “is a musical portrait of New York City, the most fluid, pressure-packed, and cosmopolitan metropolis the modern world has ever seen.” The New York

Philharmonic and the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra re-united to present The Jungle in Shanghai in July 2017.

Marsalis' rich and expansive body of music for the ages places him among the world's most significant composers.

Television, Radio & Literary

In the fall of 1995 Wynton launched two major broadcast events. In October on PBS he premiered [Marsalis On Music](#), an educational television series on jazz and classical music. Written and hosted by Marsalis, the series was enjoyed by millions of parents and children. Writers distinguished Marsalis On Music with comparisons to Leonard Bernstein's celebrated Young People's Concerts of the 50s and 60s. That same month National Public Radio aired the first of Marsalis' 26-week series entitled Making the Music. These entertaining and insightful radio shows were the first full exposition of jazz music in American broadcast history. Wynton's radio and television series were awarded the most prestigious distinction in broadcast journalism, the [George Foster Peabody Award](#). [The Spirit of New Orleans](#), Wynton's poetic tribute to the New Orleans Saints' first Super Bowl victory (Super Bowl XLIV) also received an Emmy Award for Outstanding Short Feature (2011).

[From 2012 to 2014 Wynton served as cultural correspondent for CBS News](#), writing and presenting features for CBS This Morning on an array of topics from [Martin Luther King, Jr.](#), [Nelson Mandela](#) and [Louis Armstrong](#) to [Juke Joints](#), [BBQ](#), the [Quarterback & Conducting](#) and [Thankfulness](#).

Marsalis has written six books: [Sweet Swing Blues on the Road](#), [Jazz in the Bittersweet Blues of Life](#), [To a Young Musician: Letters from the Road](#), [Jazz ABZ](#) (an A to Z collection of poems celebrating jazz greats), [Moving to Higher Ground: How Jazz Can Change Your Life](#) and [Squeak, Rumble, Whomp! Whomp! Whomp!](#) a sonic adventure for kids.

Awards and Accolades

Wynton Marsalis has won nine Grammy Awards® in grand style. In 1983 he became the only artist ever to win [Grammy Awards®](#) for both jazz and classical records; and he repeated the distinction by winning jazz and classical Grammys® again in 1984. Today Wynton is the only artist ever to win Grammy Awards® in five consecutive years (1983-1987). Honorary degrees have been conferred upon Wynton by over 30 of America's leading academic institutions including Columbia, Harvard, Howard, Princeton and Yale (see Exhibit A). Elsewhere Wynton was honored with the Louis Armstrong Memorial Medal and the [Algur H. Meadows Award for Excellence in the Arts](#). He was inducted into the American Academy of Achievement and was dubbed an Honorary Dreamer by the "I Have a Dream Foundation." The New York Urban League awarded Wynton with the Frederick Douglass Medallion for distinguished leadership and the American Arts Council presented him with the Arts Education Award. Time magazine selected Wynton as one of America's most promising leaders under age 40 in 1995, and in 1996 Time celebrated Marsalis again as one of America's 25 most influential people. In November 2005 Wynton Marsalis received The National Medal of Arts, the highest award given to artists by the United States Government. United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan proclaimed Wynton Marsalis an international ambassador of goodwill for the United States by appointing him a UN Messenger of Peace (2001).

Marsalis was honored with The National Humanities Medal by President Barak Obama in 2015, in recognition of his work in deepened the nation's understanding of the humanities and broadened American citizens' engagement with history, literature, languages and philosophy.

In 1997 Wynton Marsalis became the first jazz musician ever to win the [Pulitzer Prize](#) for Music for his epic oratorio *Blood On The Fields*. During the five preceding decades the Pulitzer Prize jury refused to recognize jazz musicians and their improvisational music, reserving this distinction for classical composers. In the years following Marsalis' award, the Pulitzer Prize for Music has been awarded posthumously to Duke Ellington, George Gershwin, Thelonious Monk and John Coltrane. In a personal note to Wynton, Zarin Mehta wrote:

"I was not surprised at your winning the Pulitzer Prize for Blood On The Fields. It is a broad, beautifully painted canvas that impresses and inspires. It speaks to us all ... I'm sure that, somewhere in the firmament, Buddy Bolden, Louis Armstrong and legions of others are smiling down on you."

Wynton's creativity has been celebrated throughout the world. He won the Netherlands' Edison Award and the Grand Prix Du Disque of France. The Mayor of Vitoria, Spain, awarded Wynton with the city's [Gold Medal](#) – its most coveted distinction. Britain's senior conservatoire, the Royal Academy of Music, granted Mr. Marsalis Honorary Membership, the Academy's highest decoration for a non-British citizen (1996). The city of Marciac, France, erected a bronze statue in his honor. The French Ministry of Culture appointed Wynton the rank of Knight in the Order of Arts and Literature and in the fall of 2009 Wynton received France's highest distinction, the insignia [Chevalier of the Legion of Honor](#), an honor that was first awarded by Napoleon Bonaparte. French Ambassador, His Excellency Pierre Vimont, captured the evening best with his introduction:

"We are gathered here tonight to express the French government's recognition of one of the most influential figures in American music, an outstanding artist, in one word: a visionary..."

I want to stress how important your work has been for both the American and the French. I want to put the emphasis on the main values and concerns that we all share: the importance of education and transmission of culture from one generation to the other, and a true commitment to the profoundly democratic idea that lies in jazz music.

I strongly believe that, for you, jazz is more than just a musical form. It is tradition, it is part of American history and culture and life. To you, jazz is the sound of democracy. And from this democratic nature of jazz derives openness, generosity, and universality."

Jazz at Lincoln Center

In 1987 Wynton Marsalis co-founded a jazz program at Lincoln Center. In July 1996, due to its significant success, [Jazz at Lincoln Center](#) (JALC) was installed as a new constituent of Lincoln Center, equal in stature with the New York Philharmonic, Metropolitan Opera, and New York City Ballet – a historic moment for jazz as an art form and for Lincoln Center as a cultural institution. In October 2004, with the assistance of a dedicated Board and staff, Marsalis opened Frederick P. Rose Hall, the world's first institution for jazz. The complex contains three state-of-the-art performance spaces (including the first concert hall designed specifically for jazz) along with recording, broadcast, rehearsal and educational facilities. Jazz at Lincoln Center has become a preferred venue for New York jazz fans and a destination for travelers from throughout the world. Wynton presently serves as Managing and Artistic Director for Jazz at Lincoln Center.

Under his leadership Jazz at Lincoln Center has developed an international agenda presenting rich and diverse programming that includes concerts, debates, film forums, dances, television and radio broadcasts, and educational activities. The JALC mission is to entertain, enrich and expand a global community for jazz through performance, education and advocacy, and to bolster the cultural infrastructure for jazz globally.

Jazz at Lincoln Center has become a mecca for learning as well as a hub for performance. Their comprehensive educational programming includes a Band Director's Academy, a hugely popular concert series for kids called Jazz for Young People, Jazz in the Schools, a Middle School Jazz Academy, WeBop! (for kids ages 8 months to 5 years), an annual High School Jazz Band Competition & Festival that reaches over 2000 bands in 50 states and Canada.

In 2010 the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra established its [first residency in Cuba](#) with a rich cultural exchange of performances with Cuban musicians including Chucho Valdes and Omara Portuondo and education programs for kids.

Education

In 2009 Wynton created and presented Ballad of the American Arts before a capacity crowd at the Kennedy Center. The lecture/performance was written to elucidate the essential role the arts have played in establishing America's cultural identity. "This is our story, this is our song," states Marsalis, "and if well sung, it tells us who we are and where we belong."

In 2011 Harvard University President Drew Faust invited Wynton to enrich the cultural life of the [University community](#). Wynton responded by creating a 6 lecture series which he delivered over the ensuing 3 years entitled Hidden In Plain View: Meanings in American Music, with the goal of fostering a stronger appreciation for the arts and a higher level of cultural literacy in academia. From 2015 to 2021 Wynton will serve as an A.D. White Professor at Cornell University. A.D. White Professors are charged with the mandate to enliven the intellectual and cultural lives of university students.

Giving Back

Wynton Marsalis has devoted his life to uplifting populations worldwide with the egalitarian spirit of jazz. And while his body of work is enough to fill two lifetimes, Wynton continues to work tirelessly to contribute even more to our world's cultural landscape. It has been said that he is an artist for whom greatness is not just possible, but inevitable. The most extraordinary dimension of Wynton Marsalis, however, is not his accomplishments but his character. It is the lesser-known part of this man who finds endless ways to give of himself. It is the person who waited in an empty parking lot for one full hour after a concert in Baltimore, waiting for a single student to return from home with his horn for a trumpet lesson. It is the citizen who personally funds scholarships for students and covers medical expenses for those in need. Immediately following Hurricane Katrina, Wynton organized the Higher Ground Hurricane Relief Concert and raised over \$3 million for musicians and cultural organizations impacted by the hurricane. At the same time, he assumed a leadership role on the Bring Back New Orleans Cultural Commission where he was instrumental in shaping a master plan that would revitalize the city's cultural base. Wynton Marsalis has selflessly donated his time and talent to non-profit organizations throughout the country to raise money to meet the many needs within our society.

From My Sister's Place (a shelter for battered women) to Graham Windham (a shelter for homeless children), the Children's Defense Fund, Amnesty International, the Sloan Kettering Cancer Institute, Food For All Seasons (a food bank for the elderly and disadvantaged), Very Special Arts (an organization that provides experiences in dance, drama, literature, and music for individuals with physical and mental disabilities) to the Newark Boys Chorus School (a full-time academic music school for disadvantaged youths), the Hugs Foundation (Help Us Give Smiles - provides free life changing surgical procedures for children with microtia, cleft lip and other facial deformities) and many, many more – Wynton responded enthusiastically to the call for service. It is Wynton Marsalis' commitment to the improvement of life for all people that portrays the best of his character and humanity.